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Delia Shahnnavaz
University of Central Florida

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Earthseed Planted: Ecofeminist Teachings in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

By: Delia Shahnavaz

Faculty Mentor: Farrah Cato

UCF Department of English

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ABSTRACT: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* is set in a world where patriarchal supremacy has stifled not only womankind, but also the natural environment of the Earth. By exploring the innate connection between the desecrated Earth and the strangled matriarchy, this paper draws direct links to Butler's world and ecofeminist theory by Vandana Shiva and others, ultimately concluding that Butler's "Earthseed" serves as a representation of a world in which ecofeminism reigns supreme.

KEYWORDS: feminism; ecofeminism; Octavia Butler; science fiction; dystopia

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Octavia Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* is much more than a dystopian fantasy adventure, for it provides a clear picture of the benefits and merits of accepting ecofeminism as Truth, an explanation of the wrath that patriarchy has rained down upon our world, and a window into what might await us at the end of the long, dark tunnel that we have allowed ourselves to be ushered into by our apathy for nature, coupled by a capitalistic greed that is stereotypically yet definitively masculine at its core. At its most basic level, *Parable of the Sower* paints a picture of ecological terror and racial tension in a post-apocalyptic world, where "water now costs several times as much as gasoline" and "beggars, thieves, and murderers" openly occupy the space of the freeways (13, 155). Butler chronicles the life of a female narrator as she grows up in an insular, protective, male dominated community, eventually creating her own path when this male-run community collapses. Butler shapes her story around the rejection of patriarchy, using language and metaphor to further develop her idea of a planet in desperate need of the feminine. Viewed through an ecofeminist lens, the world of *Parable of the Sower* becomes all the more visceral as readers assess the horror of what a white capitalist patriarchy has done to humankind and the Earth. Through the eyes of Lauren, the young woman of color who serves as our narrator, Butler depicts a world in which the possibility of peace and prosperity is found in the unification of the populace under the tutelage of a woman and the new world she represents. Thus *Parable of the Sower* becomes a story of a world rebuilt, reimagined, and ultimately healed by an ecofeminist hand.

Karen Warren explains that ecological feminism—or "ecofeminism"—is a feminist school of thought made distinct by "its insistence that nonhuman nature and naturism (i.e., unjustified domination of nature) are feminist issues" (5). To fit the Earth itself into the binary of gender is perhaps an ecofeminist reaction to the degradation that Nature has suffered within a world ruled by patriarchy; if women have been dominated by man, then so too has nature, and thus their femininity is a shared force. More simply put, it is not only the mother who suffers at the hands of patriarchy, but *Mother Nature* as well. For ecofeminist scholars like Warren, the solution to such domination is clear. If male supremacy is what hinders the growth of the feminine force, both with regards to womankind and the implied femininity of our Earth, it is a female supremacy that must wrench power from the hands of those who work to destroy and suppress her. This core belief of some ecofeminist scholars—that Mother Nature requires

the guidance of a woman to truly blossom—is based on the belief that women are more inclined to caring, born or perhaps more likely *made* nurturers not only by an imagined birthright but also as a result of their own suffering. It's with this suffering that women learn to nurture, culturally relegated to the task by a patriarchy that deems it an inferior position within a world that historically has prided itself on war and supremacy by means of colonization and destruction.

It is also a kind of suffering that speaks most directly to Butler's view of nature. If we are to believe that Earth is indeed the Mother, it is clear that her Daughters' oppression denies her the ability to flourish. Thus Earth has been ravaged to a point of no return, leaving our protagonist Lauren to dream not of simply healing the world that mankind has violated and destroyed, but of leaving it altogether. She fantasizes about leaving Earth behind for an untainted world, referring to humankind's connection to Earth as "a multi-light-year umbilical," effectively painting Earth as not only the Mother but the *womb* (Butler 72). But this is a womb desecrated by patriarchy, full of "failing economies and tortured ecologies" and one that Lauren yearns to escape, to break free of "the shadow of their parent world" (72). As Vandana Shiva explains in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, "at one level, nature is symbolized by the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance" (38). Within Butler's world, the Earth is not only a female symbol; the Earth is also a source of birth and nourishment. But Butler has a message for us: she, the Earth, has gone unnourished for too long—and thus the only logical course of action is to start anew.

From the start of *Parable of the Sower*, we bear witness to a display of what is considered to be feminine weakness by a society that is ruled by traditional masculinity. The world has become the very definition of dog eat dog; emotion is weakness, womanhood is weakness, and color is weakness, and Lauren has been dealt a hand that holds all three of these supposed flaws. Hyperempathy, her affliction since birth, was passed down to her by a drug-addled mother. Though the novel will later introduce us to men with the same symptom, our matriarchal introduction to this "sharing" is through Lauren and the pain she feels towards the pain of others. Her abilities are viewed as a hindrance, kept hidden not out of want, but out of necessity. That Lauren is sequestered behind a manmade wall, protected from the outside with the

whole force of her family's meager abilities, shows us immediately the level of care that must be taken to shield those who feel too much. Yet those chosen few who share wholly in the world's pain are not seen by society as strengthened by the act but rather are viewed as weaker because of it. Lauren's "sharing" is seen by those around her to be a sort of sickness.

If Lauren is our hyperempathetic window to the world around her, she is also our stand-in Mother Earth, feeling all there is to feel in such a punishing patriarchal setting. It is not only humans whose pain and pleasure she shares in, but even squirrels and rats, whose killing feels like "getting hit with a huge ball of air, but with no coolness, no feeling of wind" (Butler 31). Because the world of *Parable of the Sower* is one of survival, it is also one of intense and often necessary violence, a fact Lauren steadfastly reminds us of when she mentions that she fears she will die if she must ever kill a living person (Butler 31). Sharing is thus seen to be an obviously negative yet still innately "female" affliction, a view shared by Lauren and the men in her life, to such a severe degree that Lauren even muses that hyperempathy is a "desperate vulnerability" that would "be harder on a man" (Butler 289). Her father waits and prays for the passing of Lauren's so-called disease, and she recognizes that he "has always pretended, or perhaps believed, that my hyperempathy syndrome was something I could shake off and forget about" (Butler 7).

Simultaneously, there is a different, more aggressively masculine approach to her affliction as displayed by her brother, Keith. He taunts Lauren with "red ink as fake blood to make me bleed" as he sees her pain as a joke rather than as something worthy of care, concern, or the slightest protection (Butler 8). That he himself does not bleed is a significant display of his own male ineptitude: he may taunt her, as men do, but he cannot feel what she feels. He is incapable of emotion. Still, his mockery has a major effect on her. Lauren herself views her hyperempathy as a hindrance rather than a help, yet when she explains the worst of her condition to Bankole, a lover and friend, it is not herself she is overly concerned for, but rather him (Bankole), explaining to him: "worst of it is, if you got hurt, I might not be able to help you. I might be as crippled by your injury—by your pain, I mean—as you are" (Butler 247). Despite how she views her affliction, it's in her hyperempathy that she becomes not only one person but many; she is herself, and she is the rest of them too, each person she passes in the street and encounters in moments of pain and

anguish. Therefore, it's only just that her faith lies in "a religion of action" that "assigns people the responsibility to create a better destiny" (Kouhestani 899). Time and time again, we see Lauren act in line with this self-made responsibility. When Keith finally experiences what it's like to bleed, at the hands of their father, it is Lauren who tries to help alongside Cory, not because she wants to but because she feels the obligation, proclaiming "I just thought I should," a notation that might serve to further solidify her imagined, intrinsic place as Mother, and inevitably it is Lauren who "cleaned up the blood so no one would slip in it or track it around" (Butler 79). In cleaning up the remnants of Keith's pain and her own just as she was once forced to clean up what he inflicted upon her in his childish glee, Butler's question here for us is clear: if we were to all feel this wide, outreaching pain, would we be able to do what we do to the Earth and to one another? Would we be Keith, or would we be Lauren?

The Keiths of Butler's world, initially, seem to far outnumber the Laurens. The oppression and violation of humankind is an almost constant backdrop from the start of the novel to the end, and through casual displays of violence against women and the Earth, Butler makes clear that this is simply the natural way of patriarchy, a natural course for a world in which a poisonous, forceful, and stereotypical masculinity is prized above all else. There is a distinct difference to be seen between Keith, hungry for material possession and self-actualization found through capitalist greed, and Lauren's father—who seemingly wants only to nurture and care for his children, to provide sustenance rather than abundance. Yet her father, in his own stereotypical maleness, is incapable of quelling Keith's wants because patriarchy is embedded in and based on violence. Rather than nurturing his child, he tries to exert masculine force by beating him, and Keith in turn emerges as his own alpha male, proclaiming that "I won't let him beat me again" and "I don't need him hitting me and telling me what to do" before he flees his familial home (Butler 86). Their battle for dominance through violence is a distinctly patriarchal approach to conflict that goes directly against an ecofeminist philosophy that "recognizes life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of co-operation, and mutual care and love" (Mies and Shiva 5). Whether or not Lauren's father means well, society has conditioned him to be incapable of recognizing what she herself sees so easily: that care and love will be what pushes the world forth. What this tells us of the social hierarchy in Butler's world is that it is a direct reflection

of our own, a world where the “balance and harmony between women and men and between masculine and feminine values in society” has yet to be restored (Kelly 114). More importantly, Bulter's novel paints a picture of a world where violence is currency and material wealth and physical pleasure are also commodities.

Thus, rape and the mistreatment of women fall in line with the mistreatment of the Earth in a constant and senseless cycle, so often in the background that it becomes common to see, through Lauren's eyes, a mistreated woman and a ravenous dog in the same space. Time and time again, we see and hear of violence toward girls and women regardless of their age, from “a little girl, naked, maybe seven years old with blood running down her bare thighs” to Lidia Cruz “only eight years old” and “raped, too” to Zahra who cannot vocalize what has happened to her, rather calling it “...you know” because Lauren does, in fact, know without needing to be told (Butler 9, 144, 146). As Petra Kelly explains, “women's suffering seems so normal and is so pervasive that it is scarcely noticed” (114). If the women in Butler's landscape feel more than the men, if they are to be seen as a beacon of care in the way that the Earth was once able to care for her citizens, then Zahra's “you know” speaks at a far greater volume than a long, more drawn out detailing of her story ever could. Lauren understands instinctively, even under the haze-inducing shadow of her family's demise, and Zahra is aware that she will know because they share the same constant threat to their womanhood. Rape has become a facet of society as casual and easy as taking a breath, and it is at the hands of men—men aware of how easy it is to dominate and brutalize women, especially women of minimal means, often women of color who lack the social and physical power necessary to stop them. These men are insatiable and their violence is seemingly limitless, a direct reflection of the harm they impose on nature. This intrinsic link is explained by Maria Mies, who states “the greater becomes his hunger for the original whole, wild, free, woman and nature: the more he destroys the greater his hunger” (3189). Because they are the source of the violence rather than its recipients, they cannot comprehend the horror of their own acts. While Lauren is afflicted with hyperempathy, men and society as a whole struggle with hyperaggression.

Hyperaggression is only part of what Lauren battles against with her creation of Earthseed, a religion rooted in the intention to spread “Earthlife to new earths” (Butler 66). It is with the birthing of Earthseed that she first wields the weapon of her ability to create. She

readies herself to cut the umbilical cord by which she is connected to man's failings and move onward. Maryam Kouhestani notes the distinct parallel in perspectives between Lauren's step-mother, Cory, and Lauren herself, ultimately a difference of opinion between a woman dependent on husband and son and a girl intent on making her own way. Kouhestani explains Lauren's perspective as a denial of “passivity”; Lauren's step-mother believes the old days are behind them, recalling her “past life” as “good days” and yet “Lauren thinks differently and sees society's losses as a positive aspect, discovering a potential for change in society” (Kouhestani 899). Lauren's plan is dependent upon taking “root among the stars” and springs forth as she is “weeding the back garden,” firmly entrenched in the Earth herself, contemplating the way “plants seed themselves” and leave their “parent plants” while lacking the ability to “travel great distances under their own power, and yet, they do travel” (Butler 66). The Lauren of the novel's start, with her father and brothers serving as these “parent plants” and her protection, is not the Lauren who is her own protector.

Yet regardless of the growth she herself has experienced, the world remains static. So she must hide under the guise of masculinity by taking on the identity of a man to safely travel in a world that covets brute force over feeling. In adopting this physical change, cutting her hair short and dressing in traditionally male clothing, she is forced to make an effort to play the male role with shows of her own sort of violence, wielding a gun to scare off attackers who nervously tell her to “take it easy, man” (Butler 162). Despite her masculine guise and the power it affords her, she still makes the conscious choice to try to revolutionize the world through words and the act of creation rather than violence and destruction. Earthseed is not a means to be achieved through fighting or war, traditionally masculine. There is no militaristic urge within Lauren, not at her core, though she fights when she must. Instead, she plants a colony, what one might easily call an extended family of misfits, many of whom are people of color with nowhere else to go. She is maternal in her desire to spread information without force and yet it would be too simple to paint her with such a broad brush of stereotypical matriarchal characteristics. She is not the gentle, Earth mother of folklore; in fact, her beliefs are rooted in survival to such a degree that even her traveling companion is shocked when she suggests allowing a new mother and her child along on their journey, pointing out that Lauren is “going soft” (254).

But this “softness,” like her sharing, is something that she willingly quiets in favor of the pair’s entrance into their world and into Earthseed, later musing that “it’s a world gone to hell” and “we’ve only got each other to keep it off us” (255). Lauren’s rejection of traditional gender roles lends itself to a new world where hyperempathy—something innately female within the novel—is neither feminine nor masculine but universal. If, as Chelsea Frazier argues, Parable “is about ecological ethics, yes—but an ethics that points to new and fundamentally different possibilities and not improvements of existing ones” then it is no leap to apply these ethics to gender as well (60).

In her creation of Earthseed, Lauren is not a mother in the traditional sense, not the “kind, nurturing earth mother” who is “too comfortable a stereotype”—for she is “not meek” and “not weak” but rather harbors her own kind of anger on her “own behalf” and for “sisters and children who suffer, and for the entire planet” (Kelly 114). She is simply a creator, made all the more capable by virtue of her womanhood, which has allowed her to absorb the best of herself from a litany of norms and offer what Frazier calls “a conception of humanity unwed to white, male, patriarchal, neoliberal, neoimperial conceptions of humanity” (54). If ecofeminism endorses a world beyond the masculine and the feminine, promoting a unification of the best of these gender roles, then it is Lauren who becomes her own sort of Mother, her own sort of nurturer and protector. She dreams of leaving the rotting Earth behind and starting anew in the outreaches of space, trying again, viewing the plan as sensible because “a living world might be easier for us to adapt to and live on without a long, expensive umbilical to Earth” (Butler 72). The umbilical cord is one that she, as the mother of a new Earth, is keen to cut.

That Lauren names her initiative Earthseed is no mistake, though it is unique in that one might immediately think of Man upon hearing “seed”—if woman is the Earth, then is Man not the seed? But she thinks not of man when she names her new world, rather viewing the moniker as a representation of how plants “seed themselves, windborne, animalborne, waterborne, far from their parent plants” (Butler 66). Man’s animalistic purpose then becomes irrelevant. The seed becomes a self-sustained entity, no longer a terrain to be claimed by men as their own, no longer in need of a masculine force to offer it some sense of patriarchal value. As Shiva explains in “Reductionism and Regeneration,” “the seed and women’s bodies are, in the eyes of the capitalist patriarchy, among the last

colonies” and “nature, women, and non-white people merely provide ‘raw’ material” (Shiva 25). By the power of Lauren’s Femaleness, Earthseed will not be conquered. The raw material she provides is of her own volition, and she does not deal in the currency of the carnal. She does not provide a physical womb, but rather a metaphorical one; she provides an idea from which a seed springs, and from this seed, a makeshift family of followers blossoms.

This idea then belongs not only to her, but to those in need of help—more specifically, the very entities that Shiva speaks of: nature, women, and non-white people, the oppressed that have been denied instruments of value by their oppressors. The world that Earthseed is born within is one in which the rich have the power: “the power to make others submit, the power to take what they want—property, sex, life” (Butler 219). But Lauren’s Earthseed cannot be bought; her body and the bodies of her people may have once been a sort of commodity by way of sex and labor, but in her own community, their value is in the talents they are willing to share with one another. More explicitly, her “views contrast with those held by conservationists who seek to conserve environmental resources for the ultimate purpose of sustaining the economy and society as it presently functions” (Frazier 55). She rejects the pillars of the world as they stand and assigns new value to her own community. Her perspective is both “ecological and feminist” in that she “legitimizes the way of knowing and being that create wealth by enhancing life and diversity” and simultaneously “delegitimizes the knowledge and practice of a culture of death as the basis for capital accumulation” (Shiva 13). Earthseed’s worth is within each person’s being; in the way their Earth could not, they are denying the rich patriarchal force the opportunity to destroy them. By refusing the wealthy the ability to lay claim to the final frontier, the “last colonies” of literal and metaphorical seed of women, Lauren establishes a place of power for herself and her people.

Earthseed is an embodiment of all the people Lauren has met throughout her life, be they in desolate surroundings or in a world of perceived riches. When Lauren proclaims, “I am Earthseed,” she speaks not only of herself in her infinite Femaleness but of everyone. The hyperempathy she feels reaches out to every corner of the world in her self-teachings, an indicator of the unspoken sisterhood and bond with the Earth that she hopes to reclaim and reposition. The reflection of “All that you touch, You Change. All that you Change, Changes you” works as a mantra not only for women and men, but the Earth itself

as a growing and changing being punished and violated by patriarchy (Butler 1). The Earth has been changed beyond repair, and it must be left behind by those who wish to continue living rather than merely existing.

Because Earthseed is built on the grounds of ecofeminism, it is only fitting that the community's leadership does not fall into line with a previously established societal standard of white and wealthy patriarchal dominance. Womankind helped to build a world torn from her grasp, and she watched its destruction without the power once delegated to her by virtue of her position; thus reclaiming that power becomes a critical component of Earthseed and of ecofeminism. Lauren, as a young woman of color, leads the force in a fashion that reaffirms she is no longer the Other but rather *All*. It is a fact that Woman and Nature are one and the same, and as such, they are equally unappreciated as "nature and women working to produce and reproduce life are declared 'unproductive'" (Shiva 43). It is for this reason that Lauren's God is not man, nor woman, nor even a tangible or intangible Higher Being, but merely action: it is Change. She says to a rapt male listener that, "God will shape us all every day of our lives. Best to understand that and return the effort: Shape God" (Butler 195). As a woman living on an Earth that is filled by men who hate, suppress, and rape women and the Earth in near equal measure, Lauren knows that words alone are not action. Her God is Change because there is no use in a God who does not listen to prayers. She will be her own Change, she will be her own God, and in doing so, she will heal a patriarchal Earth through an ascension to "take root among the stars" (Butler 197).

In establishing a community with the primary goal of starting anew from the wreckage of a patriarchal world, one might argue that Lauren mistakenly adheres to the long embedded and oppressive belief that women must be society's rebuilders. As Maria Mies puts it, "men make war, women are supposed to restore life after the wars" (2312). However, rather than rebuilding existing patriarchal institutions, Lauren intends to rebuild for herself and those who follow the message of Earthseed. With the promise of an eternal and shifting Change, there comes the unspoken promise of a new matriarchal influence on their growing community. Her goal is not maintaining the status quo, but ascending—literally and figuratively—to something immeasurably outside of her reach. This fact is never more evident than when her community, the family she has made from society's outliers, is named Acorn. By providing "acorns enough for each of us to plant live oak trees to our dead," Lauren

assumes the role of the provider of seed, the Mother, the ultimate source of living (Butler 291). Physical seed is not all that she provides; in consoling Bankole as he despairs of "starvation, disease, drug damage, and mob rule," Lauren provides the feminine seed of her philosophy. Earthseed is Change; the masculine forces that Bankole speaks of may come to pass, but even if they do, Acorn will grow. It will bloom, and Lauren's people will adapt.

By the novel's end, it is clear that Lauren is more than merely a participant in the chaos that is happening around her. She is feminine stability, a pillar of ecofeminist belief, and a figurehead for a new Mother Earth. Butler illustrates this principle time and time again, first in allowing Lauren to display her hyperempathy as a perceived patriarchal weakness rather than a matriarchal strength, then by introducing her abilities as a leader and organizer of the Earthseed initiative. All that she is and all that she can be is feminine and forceful in equal measure; her strength is never viewed through the lens of masculinity, as it is bookended by her hyperempathy and familial caring. In a world run and ravaged by men, the only answers are in the hands of a woman, and it is she who "buried the dead" and "planted oak trees" at the novel's end (Butler 292). This, then, is the truest start of Earthseed and the clearest display of Octavia Butler's ecofeminist message: woman returns to Earth, just as man takes it away.

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